Drive carefully toward EV future

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Body

The Biden administration's initiative to expand the sales of new electric vehicles to 67% of the passenger-car fleet by 2032 is breathtaking in its ambition. Were our planet not facing a climate crisis of grave proportions, the initiative would be unjustified. But we are facing such a crisis, and the rapid conversion of U.S. cars and trucks to electric power is necessary.

The necessity of the conversion, though, requires that the administration also take steps to ensure its success. From that perspective, we are concerned that the Biden team is overdriving its headlights. To meet the new goal, the United States will need a vast network of fast-charging stations and a dependable supply of the minerals needed to make batteries - not to mention a driving public that is motivated to make a change.

The last thing we need is a moonshot-scale EV effort that can't get out of the garage - especially if, perversely, it turbocharges its opponents.

To achieve the administration's goal, the EPA plans to require a strict limit on tailpipe emissions on each automaker's inventory of cars. To meet that standard, the car companies will have no choice but to switch most of their products to all-electric models. Union leaders will see a threat to jobs. Consumers who have shown little interest in electric cars up until now will have to think again. Some may harbor ill feelings, and that will create opportunities for politicians who thrive off popular resentments.

Not long ago, U.S. politics were dominated by a president who denounced climate change as a hoax. That president, Donald Trump, withdrew the United States from the Paris accord on climate change and took numerous other steps to weaken or abolish regulations that safeguarded the environment. Now he is running to win his old office back. He and other candidates can be expected to use the EV initiative as a cudgel with which to batter President Joe Biden, and to reverse the policy if any of them should win.

Politicians who keep America's climate progress mired in political strife appear to care little about the damage they cause. They understand that a sizable constituency will reward them for denouncing perceived government mandates - whether they concern a shutdown during a pandemic, reasonable efforts to keep firearms out of dangerous hands, or EPA rules designed to take internal combustion engines off the road. Former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., tried the same tactic in opposing efficiency standards that favored compact fluorescent lightbulbs. There was no mandate, as such, but she portrayed the standards as an attempt to rob the people of their right to choose. It's a potent political charge.

If the electorate is at all susceptible to the persuasive power of facts, these should do it: Transportation is the biggest contributor of greenhouse gases generated by the United States. Scientists warn that the consequences of climate change will grow intolerable (make that even more intolerable) once global temperatures are 1.5 degrees

Celsius warmer than at the start of the industrial age; the temperature already is most of the way toward that benchmark, at 1.1 degrees. And NASA reports that, despite recent efforts to mitigate emissions, levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere were higher than ever in 2022.

The administration should continue to press its campaign to break the internal combustion engine's hold on the car and truck market. But it should couple that drive with an equally ambitious effort to educate and persuade Americans about the need to do so.

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